

The Pine Branch

Spring 1965



I dreamed a dream.
I felt untouched
By anything human or real.
In the dream I walked in life as a mist—I touched
many things but after I was gone there was no remem-
brance of my ever having been there.

—Editor

The Pine Branch

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“Administration Building”

Water colour, Georgia Swink

Pine Branch

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"I am like the locust trapped to a tree in his splitting shell."
conte drawing by Earl Willis

THE CREATIVE SPIRIT IN DEFEAT

Life weaves her web and keeps it hanging for me like a spider's for some winged insect. I am caught inside men by blood and bone, and I look out of their moulded dust like the locust trapped to a tree in his splitting shell.

My abasement is my arcade, the college graduate, who like a hungry bull rushes past the neglected gate to the green hue of distant pastures —who like a bull wading knee-deep in clover, vomiting out of his fullness, rolling with his belly turned up to the sun, tinging his coat green, loses the spots God gave him.

I lie hidden behind groaning machines in the assembly lines of factories. I was not put here in the breasts of men to watch them pound fins into automobiles to please fad. I am a butterfly trapped in their breasts, floored by their blood, waiting with saddled wings at Ambition's hitching post to fly them to grand destinies and loop their hopes around rainbows.

Give me a man who stands broad-shouldered to the world with creation his aim, and I shall blow his dust to the four corners of the earth to make him whole and at last set me free.

J. Michael Mason

Collage

Memories are
dying flowers
worn shoes
a torn glove
and the falling glitter
of a star.

The solitary
existence
of today
spans a
bridge of
loneliness
through
eternity

We Sang A Child's Song

We sang a child's song

And played a child's game.

But that was long ago.

The years are ugly now,
Dulled by the pain of days.

The world cries bitter tears—
Harsh sounds that I do not know.

And of all my simple playmates
Not one hears.

Jeunesse

Tonight I am but a child to you
You mock my love and pain
Naive am I—a young flickering star,
A lone teardrop in the rain.

Someday you'll stand, devoid of pride and grace,
Reticent of all lines and lies
While I look into your pleading face,
And laugh—supreme and worldly wise.

—Suzanne Evans



"JEUNESSE,"

Water color, Georgia Swink

Ink drawing, Tom Flemming

SMOKE AND LIGHT

SHEILA EDWARDS

I can see the smoke from a thousand chimneys—
I can see the light coming from the houses—
Little houses, big houses, black houses, white houses,
And there are people living there,
Giving birth to children there,
And dying there
There are children growing there
Laughing and crying there,
Becoming women and men there
Discovering life and becoming there
But one day they leave their houses
And enter my heart.
They bring the smoke and light with them.
This they give to me
And we grow and laugh and cry—
And love together.
As quickly as they come,
They leave,
And create an empty place in my heart,
But before I pass many chimneys more
It is not there anymore.



"CHIMNEYS," linoleum cut, Lida Catikos



"We buried him last week beneath a spreading oak"
linoleum cut, Jerry Pilcher

A CLOSENESS AFTER PARTING

J. MICHAEL MASON

We buried him last week beneath a spreading oak. He would have wanted it that way. His old house would soon follow. It blocked that road like a fallen tree, and I guess the road just gave up in the old man's front yard and figured it had no other place to go and no other purpose to serve. Strangers from the highway would often travel those dusty country roads thinking that they'd found a short cut and refuge from the monotonous blur of traffic that populated the highway. Often they would get lost and find the old man's road. They must have felt nothing but indignation after they had followed it, and stuck with it all the way to that last bend, and then had it dump them into a dusty yard, with nothing in it to throw shade but an old sweetgum with half its limbs eaten up by worms. Well, the road, like the house, lost necessity with the death of the old man; even the aimless wandering of an occasional stranger would not keep the grass from claiming its ruts. Then with the turn of several springs, the blackberry bushes would ooze out beneath the pine thickets and kill the grass, and by that time the house and all its memories would have settled down to a fern-covered foundation, with nothing but a crumbling chimney to claim the spot.

It had been almost a week since he passed away. Some say he went out of his mind a year before he died. Some of the things he used to say keep coming back now. Each word rises out of a mist of memories—each word, clear and floating breaks forgetfulness and leaves my head swimming with fond remembrances.

"I want to take an axe in my hands and build me a house way out in some far country, and live there with the things I know best," he would say, and look straight at me with eyes shining like berries beneath the white thicket of his eyebrows. I wonder if he's in that country now, sitting under a shade tree after a hot day's work, with that axe laid across his lap, gazing reverently at a house hewn from logs. Perhaps that house was waiting for him there amid the things he knew best.

The country store lay there by the road under its dull tin roof like a parasite living off the endless stream of traffic. I stopped my car just short of the faded red gas pumps. The man inside would not rush outside and offer to fill my tank; they had heard me pull up, and knew my car was old; they knew I was one of them. I got out and walked up the crumbling bricks thrown there to serve as steps. The thick smell of overripe tomatoes and stale cheese was pushed into my face along with the screen door as a man came stumbling out of the store. He was leaning with the weight of a basket of tomatoes, and he looked at me stupidly, as if he had something on his mind, but didn't know how to get it out. He finally gave up trying, and stumbled on down the steps into the dust. The screen door slammed shut before I could catch it; flies buzzed up. It seemed that every crevice in the crumbling brick steps harbored a fly, and they wasted no time in swarming madly about the door trying to get in; some followed the man with the tomatoes.

Before I could get the door open again, I heard voices coming from inside—loud voices, like the kind thrown about in the market places of cities after the buying and selling is over, and the payments have been pocketed. They were the kind of voices one hears but does not heed. But I paid them heed—I could not help it.

One said, "Well, it's a good thing he is dead. He never done nobody no good, and besides the old man was crazy—he never made a word of sense." And another: "Ben's right, old Batch was long gone before he died. You know, I hear tell he used to go out on cold nights and howl alongside his dog at a full moon." Then came the laughter—biting laughter that bit hard. The extra shells I had wanted for my gun seemed hardly worth the trouble now. As I walked away, their voices became lost in the buzzing of flies and swish of my pants. I smiled to know they were like children mocking with laughter what was beyond them.

My car groaned and pulled out onto the dusty road that led to the river swamp. Deer were there—plenty of them—bucks seldom seen by hunters, living in a world bypassed and unnoticed. The swamp and I had the highway to thank for that. It kept most of the traffic in a steady stream toward the city. The old man had shown me the swamp. It was his place.

It was late afternoon when I finally stopped my car. I got out and began walking down the muddy firelane that slid off the ridge into the swamp. The air settled here and did not breathe. Occasionally the silence broke with the distant drumming of a woodpecker. I stopped and listened to the ring of his hammer. My thoughts veered back to myself, and I could hear my heart kicking blood out of its little box. Such is the stillness of the swamp—such that a man can hear his pulse and lose himself in the drumming of distant life almost in the same instant. Methodically I reached out my hand groping for interpretation with fingers too numbed by reality to feel any revelation. The distant woodpecker kept his hammer ringing, and the air still did not breathe, and I walked on in the mud, assured that this place was to be appreciated but not felt.

It came quickly—the moment of the kill. He was standing ahead of me in the firelane with swollen neck, swollen from the rutting season, eyeing me curiously with a gaze almost sovereign. Then up from my side came the butt of my gun. The sights of my rifle became one with my eye. My face molded to the stock of my gun, eager with the urge to kill, eager with the expectation of seeing that great neck thrown back upon the ground. My palm tightened, the shot exploded, and my rifle jumped, fulfilling my every desire for glory, and honor. The buck folded in his place a hundred yards from where I stood, and lay on blood soaked legs bleating his pain. Through the woods there was nothing felt in the stillness but the agony of his dying.

I stumbled into a run. My heart was pounding away in my chest; I could hear nothing but the push of my blood. There he was, crumpled and bleeding; I quickened his death with my knife.

Then it happened. As I backed away and stood staring at this creature fighting death, I heard the old man's voice. It came like a child's voice shouted into a tunnel far away.

I have killed and with my killing have destroyed the joy of living . . . Hear me. They pay no heed, but you must listen. My face is turned up from the ground for you to know." His words came as little lights, and revelation fought reality.

"I have traveled across the morning sky with a flight of ducks, and felt the vastness of their domain and freedom there below the clouds. I have felt the pulse of life and quickening of heart and longing to wrap my arms around my God, for I have known Him, and run across an open field with Him in the moonlight before a rain . . . Understand me . . . understand."

His voice ceased with the squirming of the creature before me.

"I understand," I whispered. "I heard you."

A breeze rattled the leaves above my head; the air was breathing. I turned and stood there, gazing thoughtfully at the sun as it pulled redness behind treetops. The old man was dead. I had heard his voice, but he was dead. The secrets of hidden joy had dwelt here in the woods for him to know. Here his restless feet made their paths along which his God walked, and here he fed and slept, close and a part of that which is bursting and bounding with the pulse of life; here he knew completeness and joy, and never questioned their existence, for it was not in him to question. For him life had begun only at the age of understanding, and it had been brief like the faint glow of a dying sun, but the joy felt there shone like burnished gold, and his God knew that life for him had been full.

I would kill again and walk among men who had killed, and we would brag in drunken pride of our killing. But I would remember with silent resignation the only man I've ever known who could beat the squeeze of a trigger, Old Batch, a tender man, my father.

QUELQUE CHOSE DANS LE PASSE

Remembering past events
sitting and thinking as the lyric
“Dreaming with tears in my eyes” pours through
the record speaker.

It's more than this though. There is that axe
which cuts down the creosoted telephone poles
of consciousness to hear old crushed voices saying
something which is understood now but then
it was youth's unripe mind singing of foolish nothing.

On the Reflecting Lake the Sky Seems Real

Night's filamentous runners peer and deride my catalyst

“It need be a momentous change indeed, “They howl and cast

rivulets of bladder induced fluid toward my reaching eye

Lonely is just a word, they echo me and wrench my body

in bold empty forms

Flashing pedestal ruptured, gone, and misused. “There

is no one else afraid.”

They have said this and I believe them, for to look

Askance is to live.

—Scott Cohen



Ink drawing, Tom Flemming

SIXTY IN A MINUTE

living
a few seconds
at a time
i understand so much more

we are completely covered
arms feet legs
and no help
in sight

i think
by and by
somebody'll come along
i hope

living
a few seconds
at a time
makes it easier
but slowly
we are turning into sand . . .
they must come soon now

i am living
my last second

THE MYOPIC KID

The limits of my vision
(two blocks on a clear day)
confine me unmercifully
when I want to look
(I didn't even see that woman until I was right at her)

for me,
rumors
are more nearly true than what I see.
I hear very well, it's my eyes that bother me.

Of course,
I could always wear glasses. The shiny, black kind
with thick, glinting lenses.

Even then I might not be able to see,
but at least
nobody'd hit me.

VICTIM

I am the life I am.
I am angel and seraphim - sick and afraid.

This is a war.
And these words are a weapon.
(How often I awake at night and see the flashes)

I wander for long numberless days, I search
and try to remember. So much to remember.

And when I speak,
feeling for sounds, so much has gone away,
I wander again.

AS A PRETEXT FOR SPEAKING

Pretends
wisdom, the path of light
winding
its early way. Warm spring
to summer, we run so
quickly, never
thinking
of them. (Enough
to have fled
in summer, never
getting home. Where
we are, we do
not know, or
care. That we must
leave, when we go,
a leafy wisp
of wind. Yes . . .)

pretends
knowledge,
as an end. A single
shafted act
to obtain
what you have
never really
wanted.



"I SHALL BUY A BIRD SOON,"

linoleum cut, Earl Willis

JOAN Q. AND A BOWL OF FLOWERS

Two by two
I picked, arranged
The flowers in my bowl, my bouquet.

They were the most beautiful flowers in the world, for all
brought color
and were cared for with love like grace . . .
until one night,
wilting . . .
not wanting to throw them away
I wrapped them all
and put them in my closet . . .

wondering where their colors were

perhaps they had choked each others' life
vying for life of their own

and now their death is wrapped in paper
while I am sad
thinking flowers cannot be grey.

I shall buy a bird very soon.

—Roger Sauls

RITUAL

Relentless fingers of day
Probe my warm cocoon of slumber,
Wrench the remnants of dreams
From my numbed brain.
Reality murders fantasy.
I must again offer a human sacrifice unto the Day.

Keening winds hurl the rain
Against my unyielding panes.
Its ceaseless lament pierces
My consciousness.
Rising, satiating the demands
Of the mortal machine,
Plunge I into the Day's malstrom.
My soul, chameleon-like, mirrors
The grey dawn.

Florescent imitation of the sun
Pervades the room
Challenging the shadow-shrouded Day.
Seated behind my metallic confinement,
I drift idly in a sensory cosmos.

A single carmine camellia gleams wetly
Against a palm's bedraggled sabers.
A babble of voices . . . strident, questioning,
Knowing, empty.
Stale smoke and rain-wet plastic scent the air.
Rows of streamlined manequins . . . masks of boredom.

Lectures echo hollowly in the mind's vacuum.
Knowledge leaves a meager trail of crumbs.
Only the humble pursue; the arrogant starve complacently.
My spirit eludes the confines of concrete and steel . . .
Deserting my facade of flesh.
Futilely searching for answers to questions yet unposed.
Fragments of thought . . . obscure, persistent needles.

I follow the rigid routine . . . remedy for immaturity?
Slipping silently into the stifling conformity.
Assimilated by other tragic puppets.

Day plods on.
Grey succumbs to black.
One clock span is complete.

Fatigue renders me a vegetable.
The Day's image shattered by sleep.
I view the jumbled bits through a
Kaleidoscope . . . patterns of color and confusion.

Clouds squeeze the moon from the sky.
Stars tangle in treetops.
Rain resumes its restless tattoo and
My spirit is cradled by the wind.

—Sheila McCoy



"Tree Forms"

Linoleum cut Evelyn Spears

SONG FOR BEATRICE

They came and took Beatrice
Glantz away.

Locked her up forever
and a day.

REALLY the unusual things
that she did

Were detrimental to the practice of
brother Sid.

Such a bright, such a promising, such a
NORMAL boy.

His mother's delight, his
father's joy.

Whenever the subject of poor
Bea came up

Uncle Meyer sighed sadly and put
down his cup.

The better to be able to
wisely speak

The words of advice which week
after week

Seemed more and more the only
course to take.

Aunt Sylvia said, "It's just
for HIS sake.

She mustn't be allowed to ruin
things for Sid.

And it's not like we actually want
to be rid—."

At this point a great fussing with su-
gar and cream

And eyes not meeting—but who'd
ever DREAM

A dentist in the family! And
certainly

She should know better at the age of
forty three.

Then Papa announced, "It's settled
what to do

And the sooner the better." They
echoed, "True!"

Mama dabbed at her eyes with her
handkerchief

Which actually did little to conceal
her relief.

Rachel concluded things with, "It's all
to the good,
And we'll feel more comfortable in the
neighborhood."

They silently stood and filed
from the room

Leaving Bea's proxy Gethsemane to
crumbs and gloom.

They came and took Beatrice
Glantz away

Locked her up forever
and a day.

For Beatrice in her room on
the third floor

Had, one day, painted ceiling,
wall and door

The very blackest of black—
black as pitch.

Black as death—black
as a witch.

The neighbors soon spied the black win-
dows up there

And deduced who was living at the top
of the stair.

Hostile eyes told the Glantzes something
must be done

In spite of the dentist, in SPITE of
such a son.

So they came and took Beatrice
Glantz away.

Locked her up forever
and a day.

And none of them ever
ever knew why

Bea had to paint away the stars
and the sky

And other like things;
joy, beauty,

The tenderness of love, the honor of duty.

She had known these existed for-
ever it seems

Through all of her days, in all
of her dreams.

But when she opened her lips, to
answer the call

She could not move them, could not
move at all.

So for years she stood inside
of her room
Watching seasons change, watching
flowers bloom
Knowing that love was eddying
all about
But never finding the key to let
herself out.

Out of the prison she had
somehow made.
Beneath the oak, children laughed
in the shade.
Green-gold fishes darted in the
pool below,
Silver-bare branches gathered
treasures of snow.

One day, overnight buds
were springing
And somewhere, everywhere things
were singing—
At long last Bea could look,
listen no more
So she began to paint the
windows, the door—

They came and took Beatrice
Glantz away
And locked her up forever
and a day.



"They Locked Her Up Forever and a Day"
linoleum cut, by Dianne Leary

FLIGHT

The only victory over love is flight,
Sometimes one must flee in cover of the night.

For when cornered, one sometimes feels tight,
And must flee with all his might.

To be loved is only defeat,
And man soon rests at women's feet,

But seemingly, man would rather kiss women's feet,
Than be in the driver's seat.

Name one victory with flight,
And I'll show you a man in for a cold, lonely night.

—Gary Starrett

PLEA

No light of God or man can illumine the night
Wherein I dwell.
Always the day dawns midnight.
In my crowded isolation, I offer
My bruised heart to the vast emptiness
Surrounding me,
Presumptuously in my ignorance
Imagining myself worthy of love.
Time makes of me a mockery . . . Vainly I
Await the phantom Dawn.
Piercing, wild laughter, fleeting fragrances,
Faceless voices tantalize my crippled senses.
My hesitant steps dogged by frustration and humiliation,
My bitter companions.
Clutching to my breast pity—the rags of love—
My soul streams from my sightless eyes,
Making muddy puddles at my feet.
O God, unclasp these pitiless fingers around
My eyes that I might live.

—Sheila McCoy



Linoleum Cut

Yvonne Brown

VOICES

The window casement
Below my grasp
Lies white and still,
It is cold in death
With the green
Paleness of reflected
Blight
Hard — sliding on its
Surface.

It shivers with the wind
And my touch;
The stark shiver
Of dead things.
It cannot hear
The voices
That I hear.

It is my own wind
Out there;
My call to that
Shadow,
To thnat Limbo Region
That Lies
Beyond Hall.

I hear them
And I a nswer
And I answer
With the fading
Of my flesh
To their Dominion.

—Edith Moore

ALCHEMY

I heard a mountain sing
A ringing, booming tune,
And a waterfall staccato
Dropped a rhythm to a Loon
Standing in the shadows
Of a dancing, dark Lagoon.

I heard a forest speak
A breeze-song to the Spring
And the larnyx-limbed treetops
Whistled tender whisperings
To a fawn who stood
At twilight,
By a tawny sapling.

—Edith Moore

THE SEARCH

Beginning of the century
Education was the plan;
To usher in a heaven
Peace, goodwill to man

Beginning of the century
Science began to cry;
We'll relieve the suffering
If you'll only let us try

Beginning of the century
The Church began to cry;
God is on our side
He'll not pass us by
Education, atoms, and our beliefs
Will certainly meet the test;
A new society will begin
All of mankind will be blest

Alas, something is amiss
No peace can we forsee;
Nations still fight nations
Many brothers are not free

And yet the answer was given
Many years ago;
By a very lowly Carpenter
Who showed us so we'd know

Freedom, equality, and true peace
Truly comes from above;
But to express themselves here on this earth
Man first, must learn to love

For love is the only power
That transcends hate and pride;
And only as we love all men
Is God really on our side

Perhaps one day we'll realize
The truth and see the light;
That all good things begin with love
And love sets the wrong things right

—James R. Smith

HEY MAMA, HEY CHILD CAN'T YOU HEAR BLIND B^Y FULLER CALLING YOU?

Hey you girls. Here I am, It's me! The eternal one. Mr. Nothing. I ain't got no flashing blue eyes, but they are penetrating. My physique is kind of shot—flabby and all. My personality is zero and my ideas are scorned.

I think of ya'lls bodies a lot but sex is something I ain't tried yet.

I remember a while back, I had a date with this masculine type of girl. We swapped dirty jokes all night. Oh Lord, I can remember the time when me and this girl I thought was idealistic, talked about J. D. Salinger and Henry Miller all night. Boy, I was enthused about her until I saw her holding hands with Bill Adair, the stupid slick playboy. They were probably laughing at me. One girl I met I fell in love with. I had a hell of a time telling her and when I did she became cold as iced bait. She said it was infatuation. The last I heard about her, she was dating this Air-Force guy.

Well this dating and love situation has me baffled. You girls ought to love me just because I'm human, but you don't. You girls look for things like personality, looks, security in a boy.

I try to say sarcastically that they ain't but one thing I look for in a girl but dammit I fall in love with every girl who is nice to me whether she is sexy or not.

I'm like a man jumping off lover's leap without a lover. Listen you girls how about talking with me some more. What's that you say? You have a life to lead? Well, go ahead and lead one. I'll sit here and talk to death for awhile.

—Scott Cohen



THE KIM

There was a mist in the Eastern Mountain, holding the dawn, which struggled in its embrace, breaking through erratically to shed suppliant light on the stoic hills.

If the mist had crossed only a small dimension, it could have noticed an infinitesimal living speck resting on a hill toward the west.

"The Wet Cloud is a strong lord and She will never free herself," whispered the voice of Su-Ling, standing beneath the scrub pine of the western hill, watching the Morning's Trials.

She smiled to the Passion of the Mist and bent to kiss the dew from a hillside azalea.

"Where are the small ones of the Infinite?" she asked. "On this dark morning I must speak to Kim, the All-Wise. I have a need for console wisdom the day for my Prince of the High Temple wishes my reply very soon." She sighed smilingly and caught the glimmer of light from the struggling Dawn.

In the fathomless mirrored darkness of Su-Ling's eyes the flower dipped gracefully and hummed a strange song to the earth. For a moment the world was deep in silence and then appeared in those dark mirrors the faces and forms of a tiny, regal family. The Ruler Kim, rose first and bent slowly in an ancient bow with his tiny perfect hands clasped flat one against the other.

He spoke with the shadowed resonance of deep bells, "Anyongg hasimnika, Are you well?" Su-Ling answered, "Ne, Komapsumnida, "Yes, my Lord, and are you?"



There was a mist in the Eastern Mountain

Wood Cut Sammy Dutton

A shadow passed close to them for a moment, then Su-Ling said, "Dear honourable Kim, I must speak to you of a great matter that has caused weight in the ancient caves of my soul. The Prince of the Bright Mornings wishes me to be his bride, against the will of his honourable parents, but he is willing to forsake all to secure my hand. He awaits my answer now. Give of your wisdom; Kim, the Great; Kim, the mighty Infinity; Kim, the Atom. Your humble servant asks you in all unworthiness."

The Kim Ruler bent low to the ground and listened intently to the voice of the Earth. He spread his delicate fingers in sensitive silence, and waited for the Great Mother's intelligible heartbeat. Suddenly, after many long minutes, the Kim raised and clapped his hands imperiously. A puff of blue smoke jarred the morning with its violence and the small stormed countenance of Kim darkened greatly.

His voice when he spoke climbed to the air above the mountain and broke into a shower of heavy rain.

"I have spoken to the Great Earth Mother. She forbids the intrusion of your unworthiness among the gray stone traditions of the Temple Prince. Go quickly, I cannot speak more!" And he was gone.

Her eyes snapped quickly back to the cold rain and Su-Ling rose slowly, her small face contorted in much anguish. For a moment the sun touched her through the rain and the eyes glowed translucent blue with great hurt. But there was no one to see.

She straightened and turned her thin shoulders toward home, toward the hovel under the bridge where she would prepare the hard-got rife and kimehi for her three children who lay asleep now on their cruel straw mattress; and there was no one to help.

As she moved down the mountain with slow step the dark opacity of her eyes returned and she murmured "Chumnahnimalselm inmida, It doesn't matter."

MICA

The rank odor of cremation filled the city. From the ceiling hole that opens to the mock city of the outer world, a small ray of light found its way through the smoke and dust. An infant cried and was heard only by itself. The parents had died of rickets and now the child was left to face life in an alien existence.

Mica covered only his loin cloth slumbered softly with the innocence of youth but with the indulgence of old age. The pale undernourished flesh covered a frame of small bones. His bearded face lay inert on his woven rug which was his only protection from the earth. A knife lay at his side. Mica was thirty-five, but in his culture he had reached old age.

Mica awoke and raised no prayer to God because he knew none. In the morning dusk which prevailed throughout every day, Mica thought of only one word, "I". The glow of light fell upon his fifteen year old companion. Her straight black hair fell carelessly in her face and her one beauty mark, the ring in the left side of her nose glowed as the light struck it. Her clothes were scanty for she knew no modesty. Soiled linen was wrapped around her body. She slept in dreamless slumber because she knew no dreams to dream.

Mica had wandered into this section of town and had chosen to remain.

Abdul, Mica's child by his sister, crawled across the damp floor not because of youth but necessity. His feet and hands rolled inward; therefore, he walked on curled nubs. The upper teeth emerged through his lips. Muffled sounds like a dog spilled from his mouth. Mica ignored his being.

An infant cried; Mica heard but crying was prevalent and laughter was seldom heard. He rose from his rug, wrapped himself in sordid cloth, and walked out of his hollowed dirt cave into an echoing passage of tunnels. He entered the grayness of another and found there his life's work, a rug.

The skill of rug making had been taught to him at the age of five. He obtained no further education because there was none. With an unconceivable speed he boiled weeds and mixed his colors by their odor. His nimble fingers ran across the rug counting the rows. At the same time he placed his nose to each layer to detect its color. The skilled hands worked at a steady complacent speed. His whole mind became consumed in his work; therefore, he cut out the dark impending exterior world. His body became a pulsating motion and Mica asked no more from it. Hours passed like seconds; his body became exhausted and pains of hunger gnawed at his stomach. He rested. Satisfaction was his pay. Food held no power of routine; it was consumed when needed and available.

Mica ambled back to his dirt cave and found Arif lighting the olive oil that floated on top of the water in her cooking pot. Smoke floated to the ceiling and coated the dirt walls. She moulded flap jacks like bread in her hands and cooked them in the water. She folded them around pieces of half decayed lettuce stalk. They ate only with their hands and threw a few morsels to Abdul, who devoured them with enthusiasm. If only Abdul had been a dog he could have howled and bitten them in retaliation. He held their indifference inside of his half-witted brain and showed no outward emotions. After eating, the three were sated physically and asked for nothing else. The need to communicate seemed insignificant and was used only when necessary.

Arif and Mica departed leaving Abdul to his own desperation. Arif let her bare feet lead her to a squatted dirt cave where sets of primitive forks, knives, and spoons were being made. Unlike most women of this culture, she had been taught a trade and this was carving. Arif set her goals and one was to have meat. Meat was rare and few could obtain it. She carved by touch these simple tools of eating, but never knew for what use they were intended; or she simply ignored their purpose.

Mica had returned by the long dark passages to his rug. As he entered he felt the presence of another human being by the vibrations of his body and the odor of the human

race. Mica's soul fluttered at the thought of harm being done to his rug. The stranger leaped back unhesitatingly and refused to answer questions hurled at him by Mica. Mica sensed hostility in the vibrations and resounding quietness. Instinct became action. The knives flew wildly, often missing but occasionally hitting their mark. Mica's forehead became beaded with perspiration; warm blood trickled down his arms and legs. The vibrations stopped. Mica made a calculated throw and the knife hit its target. The body crumpled into a motionless mass. Mica picked it up carelessly and made his way to the cremation room. Grown people felt him pass; children saw him.

Returning Mica stopped at a mound of dirt, dropped a can with a string on it into the mound. This water was the life spring of the city although it had already passed through two cities. He drank from it and washed from it what blood he could from his body. He heard the faint cry of a child, but the only thing he wanted was to return to his rug.

Abdul had crawled from his dwelling into unfamiliar passages that echoed his aloneness. A cry much like a dog's whine shook his twisted body. No one was there to hear except the crying infant and even it was becoming weak. Not knowing where to turn he crawled toward the plaintive voice.

A large truck rolled down into the city's main tunnel. The driver emerged wrapped in layers on layers of cloth to protect him from the heat of the outer world. He traded cheap cloth and half ruined meat for rugs that represented many years of work and patience. He checked the narrow passages leading to the main road. There he found Abdul who approaching despair had not given up. The trader looked in awe for this was the most beautifully deformed human being he had ever seen. He spoke with concern to Abdul's welfare and asked him if he would like to better his life. Such logic coaxed Abdul into returning with the man to the outer world. The trader's hands itched with joy at the thought of he fine price some freak show in a circus would pay him for such a fine specimen.

Mica worked steadily, his blood dripping rhythmically to the ground. As he completed the last row of exquisite design, he ran his fingers from the top to the bottom of the huge rug, feeling the intricate designs and smelling the aroma of the merging colors. He smiled to himself; this was his own creation. He had no intention of selling his rug for a mere token and a few moments of verbal glory. He used his remaining energy to carry it back to his dwelling. Mica dropped it, spread it out, and crawled onto it, blood and all. He was satisfied.

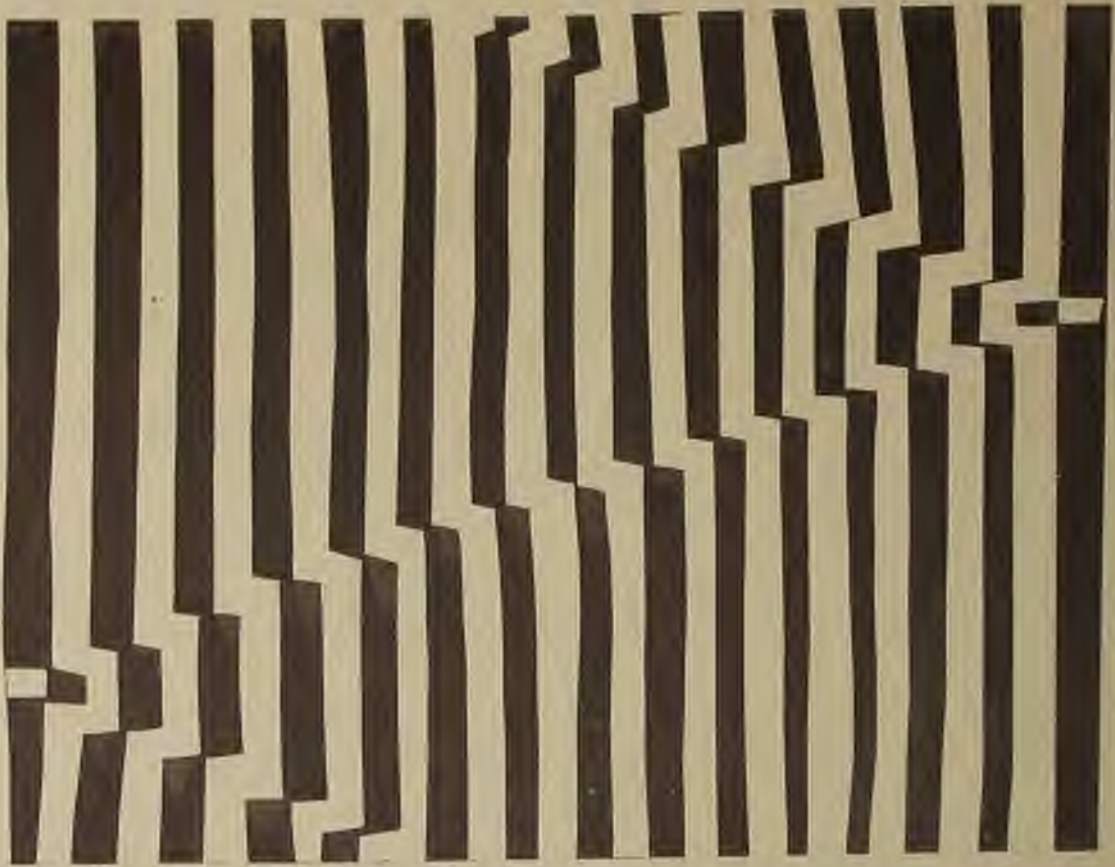
Arif had completed many days of toil and finished her set of wood carvings. She proudly carried her work to the meat cell. She gripped them in her grubby hands. The scent of meat filled her nostrils. She handed over her labor and received a flank of meat literally covered with flies and crawling with maggots. Meat was scarce and precious to her; she was pleased.

Returning to her dwelling she sensed Mica's condition as she tripped on the rug and felt the warm blood touch her toes. The almost non-existent cry of an infant broke the silence that contained Arif's thoughts. She turned from both, lit the olive oil in the water and proceeded to cook her meat. The scent of it aroused Mica. Arif offered him some from the generosity she had found in her own self-esteem. Mica chewed some but could not swallow it. They both missed the presence of Abdul but neither spoke of it.

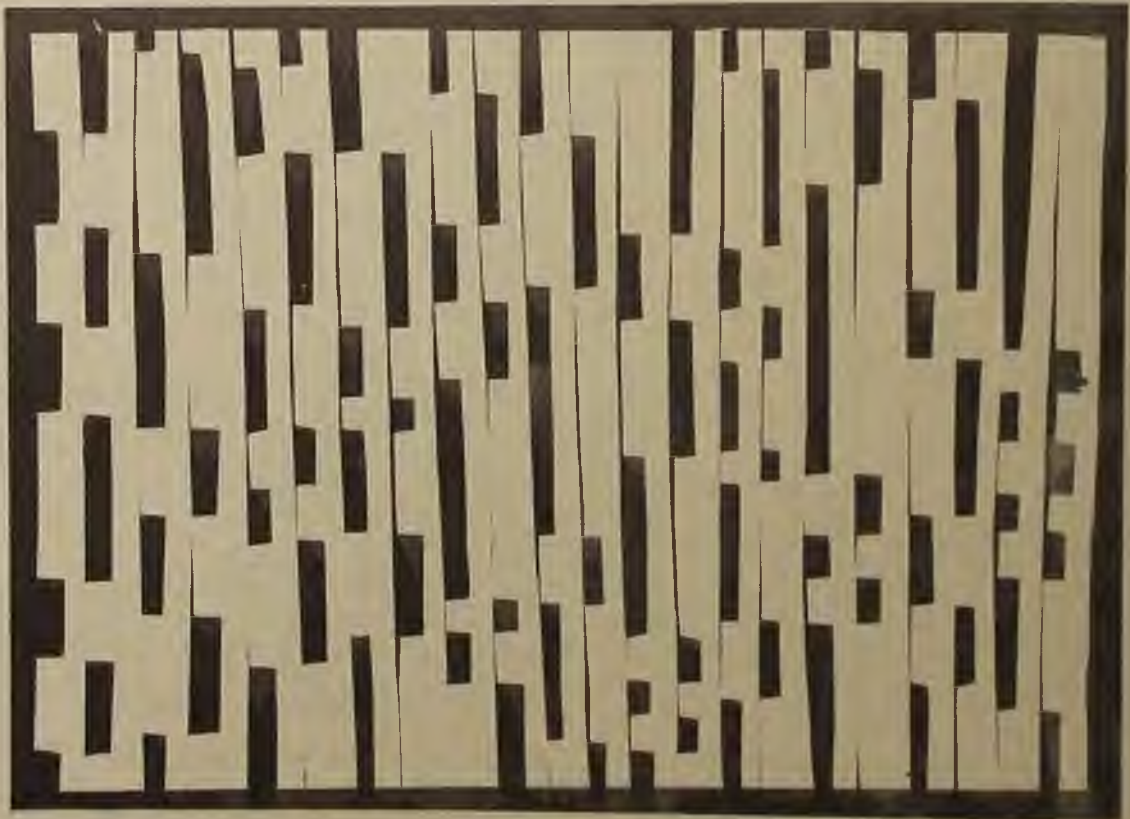
Mica lowered his head to the rug and waited for death. His blood had been absorbed by the rug. There was no fear of death because he had no pretense of knowledge. No one offered help; no one was capable. Death was inevitable. Arif wiped the perspiration from Mica's forehead and whispered, void of emotion, "I would complain." Mica replied, "It is too late." At the same moment the weak cry of the child ceased and it found rest.

The odor of cremation filled the city once more. The infant and Mica laid side by side in their equal deaths, as the flames consumed their bodies.

—Gail Allen



Nellie Cohen



Betsey Harrison



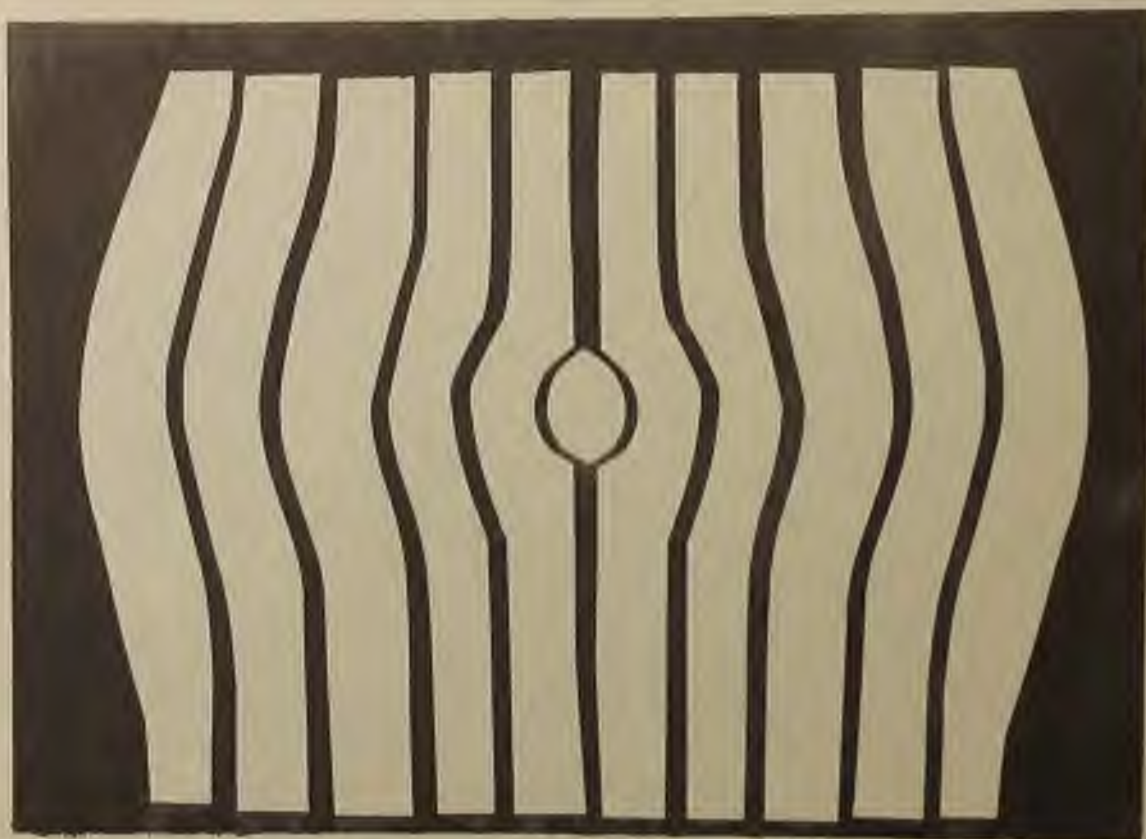
Wyonne Swilley



Gary Traylor



Betsy Harrison



David Robinson



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Sammy Dutton